The Fourth Church Pulpit

WHO'S IN? WHO'S OUT?

June 9, 1996

John M. Buchanan

In my view, the mission of the Church is not to enlarge its membership, not to bring outsiders to accept its terms, but simply to love the world in every possible way — to love the world as God did and does. The body of Christ is a network of organic connections between people, connections which makes one's joy another's joy, one's suffering another's suffering. In this sense, everyone, Christian or otherwise is included in the body of Christ — included not within an organizational framework or a theological point of view, but included in a community of compassion. If we are able to love the world, that will be the best demonstration of the truth which the church has been given.

Parker J. Palmer
The Company of Strangers:
Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut Chicago, Ill. 60611
Phone: (312) 787-4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture
Genesis 21:8-21
Matthew 9:9-13

"I desire mercy, not sacrifice."
Matthew 9:13b (NRSV)

There is no more profound human need than to be included, to be welcomed, to be invited, to be an insider.

There is no more painful human experience than to be excluded, kept out, pushed away, to be an outsider.

When I was a youngster life was one continuous baseball game in June, July and August. Every morning after breakfast we gathered at the baseball field. Someone produced a ball, another brought a bat. When a critical mass, a minimum of eight had gathered a game, of sorts, could be played starting with a peculiar ritual.

The two oldest and biggest would select themselves as captains with the right of choosing members of their team. Because the talent pool was very limited the question of who chose first was a fairly important matter. Sometimes it was decided by the toss of a coin, sometimes by throwing a bat.

The winning captain was allowed to make the first choice — which he did — of the best player in the remaining pool. The losing captain chose next and so on. And the little boys, the remnants, stood around, waiting to be chosen, standing there with heart in hand and ego wide open and vulnerable, hoping not to be the last chosen. Or, worst of all, if there was an odd number present, being chosen by no one, a left-over, sometimes even the precipitating cause of another argument about which team would be forced to take him.

There is no more profound need than to be included.

There is no deeper hurt than to be excluded.

There is in the Bible an ongoing story of God gathering in all those who are excluded and rejected. It is sometimes a counter plot, a second story line in the Bible, but it is a very important part of the narrative and it frequently challenges us, our culture, our institutional behavior, and our personal faith.

The two stories which we heard this morning illustrate.

The first, the story of Hagar and Ishmael, is almost a footnote, a secondary plot to the main story in Genesis which is about Abraham and Sarah, the father and mother of Israel, the primal parents of us all. Abraham needed a son. Patriarchs in the ancient world had to have a male heir. Sarah didn't conceive and so she suggested that her maid, Hagar, might serve as a surrogate. The plan worked. Hagar became pregnant, had a son, and named him Ishmael. Then Sarah became pregnant. When her son Isaac was born, Abraham had a problem. Isaac is the heir apparent, his blood line is pure. But what to do about his first son, Ishmael, whose mother was only a hand maid. It is not a pretty story. Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness. They run out of provisions: no food, no water. The baby is about to perish. His mother can't stand to watch. But God hears the baby's cries and intercedes. An angel, with tenderness tells the frantic mother, "Lift up the boy and hold him." Child and mother are saved. Ishmael, like Isaac, becomes the father of a great nation. It is the Arab world's connection to Abraham and the fundamental kinship between Jews and Arabs and all of us. But the important thing to understand here is that while God's man Abraham is kicking Hagar and Ishmael out, pushing them away, excluding them, God intercedes. God reaches out and gathers them back in. It is a story of pure, lovely grace.

Think of how radical that story is. In the ancient world religion helped to define and delineate tribal identity. But here, in the heart of the tradition itself, is another word, a very different word, a bold revolutionary suggestion that there is a basic kinship between Israelite and Ishmaelite, that the God of Israel is not only Israel's God, but is the Lord and protector and God of the Ishmaelites as well.

Israel did not always remember that word. Nor have we. But it is there from the beginning.

In Jesus' day the religion of his people has once again forgotten the word of inclusion, acceptance and grace. In the tidy world of the first-century scribe or pharisee, people were either in or out. You were inside the circle of propriety, acceptability, righteousness, if you obeyed the religious law, kept the festivals, practiced the rituals. You were outside the circle if you did not. Everybody knew who was in and who was out. The name for the outsiders was eloquently simple - "sinners."

From the very beginning, however, Jesus challenges that neat division, that simple categorization of people into the insiders and outsiders, the righteous and the sinners, the included and the excluded. The way the gospels tell it he began his public ministry with a breathtaking sequence of public acts which challenge and, in fact, violate the tidy boundaries religion has created between insiders and outsiders.

He touches a leper, a flagrant violation of religious rules.

He heals a paralytic and forgives his sin.

He walks by Levi, a tax collector, and invites him to be a disciple.

Religious culture had already decided that those three — the leper, the paralytic and the tax collector — were unfit. The leper was unclean, the paralytic was guilty of something, the tax collector was universally detested for collaborating with the hated Romans, doing their dirty work for them and becoming wealthy at the expense of their neighbor.

Those are Jesus' first encounters and in each case someone who was on the outside is now brought inside, into the circle of God's love and acceptance.

When he follows up that revolutionary behavior by inviting them all to dinner, it is almost more than the scribes and pharisees can bear. In a delightful nuance the text makes sure the reader knows what is happening by telling us that the dinner guests, the sinners, recline with Jesus. He's not lecturing them, not scolding them for their sin, they're lying back and enjoying themselves, in true Middle Eastern hospitality.

The human need for acceptance and the self-affirmation it creates is one of the most important truths about us. The psychologists tell us that one of our first and most basic needs, as soon as we are born, is to be accepted and affirmed by someone. It's why it is so very critical that newborns have human contact, have warm arms to embrace them, to include them, to welcome them to the family.

And tragically, it is precisely the reason things go so badly for us as individuals, or races, or nations when that basic inclusive affirmation does not happen.

We need it so desperately we create social structures to provide it, to tell us that we are somebody, that we matter, that we are included in some group — fraternal organizations, clubs, sororities, there is something for everyone; the pipe fitters club, motorcycle clubs, Lions, Elks, Moose, even Odd Fellows; and the important function they perform is to affirm us by including us in something.

The mystique and power of gang culture is precisely because so much of the rest of life for many of the urban poor is not affirming and including, but rejecting, excluding. Gangs evoke enormous loyalty which is difficult sometimes to understand, until we see that in the gang the young men and young women receive affirmation, acceptance and inclusion which are tragically absent from the rest of life.

Sometimes religion plays directly into this human need of ours. We want boundaries. We want to know who is in and who is out.

Reynolds Price, distinguished novelist, poet, literary critic, professor of English Literature at Duke University, has carried on a life-long lovers quarrel with Christian faith and the Christian church. As is often the case, he is entranced by Jesus but not so impressed with his followers. In a new book Price writes:

> "I clearly believe that the gospels deliver what they claim to contain — excellent news for anyone with ears to guess at the tone of its naked first-century voice, with eyes to pierce its local dress and gait — but I cannot believe that such excellent news excludes any member of the human race ... Jesus the Jew dined — by free conviction and desire — with the furthest outcasts of his time and place. Jew and Gentile, the sheep despaired of by all other shepherds, and he did not apparently exhort them to shame but pledged to them first entry rights into God's kingdom." (*Three Gospels*, p. 33)

Price employs religious imagery in his writing, deals with theological and moral issues and makes consistent use of biblical language and examples. Nevertheless, he stays away personally from institutional religion. In *Three Gospels* he tells why:

> "Orthodox Christianity, the church, in most of its past and future forms, has defaced or even reversed whole broad aspects of Jesus' teaching, but in no case has the church turned more culpably from his aim and his practice than in its hateful rejection of what it sees as outcasts: the whores and cheats, the traitors and killers, the baffled and stunned, the social outlaw, the maimed and hideous and contagious. If it is possible to discern in the gospel documents a conscious goal that sent the man Jesus to his agonized death, can we detect a surer aim than his first and last announced intent to sweep the lost with him into God's coming reign." (*Ibid*)

Price doesn't name it, but in his most recent novel, *A Promise of Rest*, he does chronicle the experience of a young man dying of AIDS and his sharp critique of the church's exclusivism feels to me like it is addressed to our current and controversial struggles with the whole matter of homosexuality. The Presbyterian Church, along with every other church, is discussing the topic, particularly whether homosexual orientation and behavior should disqualify a person from ordination to the clergy or to church office. Presbyterians do not agree with one another on the topic, as we continue to study and discuss and decide, but we must remember that there is no place for exclusivism in this church, that our Lord simply overlooked the boundaries created by his own religious tradition and sat at table specifically with those who were otherwise stigmatized as sinners and excluded.

Sometimes in its zeal to be faithful the Christian church has become exclusive. Quaker theologian Parker Palmer writes:

> "An intimate community is formed by an act of exclusivism — 'we' are in and 'they' are out. The very fact that a group of people have a sense of community with one another suggests that they have drawn a boundary around themselves." (*The Company of Strangers*, p. 130)

Palmer is helpful in pointing out that when the church calls itself a family, as it often does, it needs to understand that the family of Jesus is open and as big as the human race, that all sorts of people gather at table with him, and that the very intimacy we sometimes seek in our religious affiliations can be contrary to the very spirit of the one we would follow.

How important is this?

I would propose that there is no more important topic for the future of the human race. The *Chicago Tribune* reported last week on what our GIs are doing and encountering in Bosnia, fractured deeply and profoundly along national and racial and religious lines. The paper said:

> "American GIs came to Bosnia ready to deal with snipers, terrorists, land mines and anything else the warring factions might throw their way. What they were not prepared to deal with is the depth and intensity of the hatred fostered by centuries of ethnic war."

Specialist Matthew Reid of Chestertown, Maryland said:

> "I've never seen so much hatred. Sometimes it's very depressing. I've never been exposed to anything quite like this before."

If there is anything the world needs it is a word of grace, an ethic of inclusive, unconditional love, a politics of inclusion, not exclusion.

I would propose as well that there is no more immediately relevant topic for our own nation. A series of bombings of African-American Christian churches has interrupted our assumption that violent racism is behind us and that as a nation we have learned to accept and affirm all of our people. Someone has burned down thirty African-American churches, the most recent a Presbyterian Church in North Carolina last Thursday night. The sudden emergence of a newly vital Ku Klux Klan and other racist hate groups is a sobering reminder that the work is not yet done and that people of goodwill, committed to the inclusion of all God's children at the table, in the schools, in the churches and boardrooms and clubrooms in the country must not be silent or inactive.

And not only because I am a pastor, but because I know it personally to be true, I propose that there is nothing you and I need more urgently than the word of grace, the welcoming invitation of Jesus to come in and sit down, to be part of the family, accepted, affirmed and loved.

There are times when you and I run out of resources and don't know how we're going to make it. It doesn't matter whether we are rich or poor or somewhere in between. There are times when what we have is not sufficient. And in those times may we remember God hearing that baby cry in the wilderness and interceding to provide for life and strength and the ability to carry on.

There are times when we conclude that we are not acceptable, not good enough, not smart enough, not attractive enough, times when we experience banishment to a wilderness of guilt, exclusivism and rejection and in those times may we remember the dinner party with the tax collectors and sinners reclining at Jesus' table.

And sometimes it is illness, maybe even malignancy that causes us to feel on the outside looking in at God's favored ones and we find ourselves asking, "Why me?"

In those times may we remember this one who reached across all the barriers to touch the leper, to restore the paralytic, to bring back into the family those who were on the outside.

Leslie Newbegin, missionary, Bishop of the Church of South India and much beloved Christian leader wrote:

> "When we see Jesus eagerly welcoming signs of faith among people outside the house of Israel, when we see him welcoming those whom others cast out, when we see him on the cross with arms outstretched to embrace the whole world ... we are seeing the most fundamental of all realities: namely a grace and mercy and loving kindness that reaches out to every creature." (*The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*)

Thank God for that. Thank God for the hope for the world that is in it. Thank God for the promise of the church's renewal in it. Thank God for the promise for our nation's healing. Thank God for the grace, mercy and loving kindness that reaches out to you and me. Amen.